

Posted by u/PM451 5 hours ago 

Rules Of War

 OC

The image flicked to a new recording, another prisoner being interrogated. Female this time. She was silent, glowering at the interrogation officer. She had never spoken. Although once, she had ejected saliva onto a guard's face.

Some animals on their world sprayed venom, giving the animal more range than a bite, so it had taken them awhile to believe that her saliva wasn't toxic. Not just not toxic to them, but not at all. The whole act seemed to be no more than defiance for the sake of itself.

The screen changed through other examples of the humans being interrogated, some angry, some begging, some seemingly cooperative, before changing the recording back to the first one. He'd been one of the most cooperative.

He seemed nervous.

Not unreasonably, the human would have insisted. While walking home from his shitty part-time job in his shitty little town, he'd been captured by a group of alien warriors, taken aboard a cloaked shuttle and transported to what he was told was the scout ship for an alien invasion fleet.

How else to top 2022, he'd thought at the time.

There had been three other humans on the shuttle with him; on the main ship, he'd seen others in the distance being marched to their individual cells. Some looked foreign. Gathered from other countries? Other continents? A lot. From what he saw, maybe fifty to a hundred people in that batch.

Now he was sitting in an weirdly shaped and uncomfortable seat across a disturbingly normal looking white plastic table from a large insectoid creature asking him questions about his world. The latest of many sessions that were part language-lessons, part interrogation. The aliens shared information about their own race and culture, along with their intentions against them, as part of trying to teach him, and to understand humans.

In spite of his improved use of the alien language, in halting words the man asked why they are revealing so much to him. The interrogator replied, as he had to many of the others, that the prisoners would all be killed after they served their purpose, so there was no danger of useful intelligence returning to Earth.

A little later, when discussing the way the aliens (and by contrast, humans) fought wars, the man had raised the subject of "rules" of war. The man asked, apparently as an example, "So, if a prisoner escaped... Take me for example, if I escaped... would you

hurt the other humans on the ship?"

Like the interrogator, those watching the recording leaned forward at this point.

"You can't escape, you're a prisoner."

"Right, but humour me. If I did, and maybe killed some guards, would you hurt the other prisoners?"

"They're going to be killed..."

"No, in addition to that."

"In addition to being killed?"

"Yeah, you know, torture, mock-executions, sexual assault, starvation, anything intended to cause extreme pain or fuck with their minds."

Horror, confusion. "What would be the value of those things?!"

"Revenge, indirect punishment, lots of reasons. But that's a no, is it?"

The commander turned off the footage. He'd already seen what came next.

"And the others are still detained?" He'd also already asked that question.

"Yes, Commander. Only that one escaped."

"And he's dead?"

"Yes sir, he died trying to short the high-voltage electrical system."

"Did he realise what it was?"

"We taught them to read our basic technical script as part of teaching them enough Single-Speech to interrogate."

"He deliberately grabbed high-voltage power cables connected to the detention force-field system?"

"Yes, Commander. If the backup hadn't come in, it might have actually taken down the whole system. It certainly wasn't designed with this in mind."

"Freeing them all?"

"Only into the detention wing."

"And were the other humans aware of this?"

"There was no sign of prior communication..."

"But?"

"Many of them noticed the fields on their cells flickering and starting trying to attack them."

"Using?"

"Anything. Including their bodies."

"Does their nervous system not receive painful shocks from the fields?"

"Yes sir. They seem to experience even more pain than we do."

"Yet did it anyway."

"We had to sedate some before they harmed themselves."

"And none of them are soldiers?"

"None."

"We're sure?"

"Every indication is that they are average members of their species."

"<sigh> How did he kill his interrogator? I couldn't see... the details."

"A crude blade made from a piece of material broken from his food tray, shoved repeatedly through gaps in his carapace, especially around the head and eyes." He brought another image up onto the screen.

"Show it to the others... Clean it, *then* show it to the other humans. Ask if they recognise it. Obviously, don't let them touch it."

"Most claimed not to know anything about it. A few said it was a "shiv". An improvised prison weapon. We asked them if they had experience with them, and they said no. We asked how they knew about them, and they seemed uncertain. They said, everyone knows."

"And they are not soldiers?"

"No, Commander."

"Nor criminals?"

"We don't believe so."

He suddenly had a bad feeling, "Wait, if the others said they *all* know... Search their cells. Immediately."

"The ones that recognised the...?"

"***ALL OF THEM***. Pay *extra* attention to the ones who said they *didn't* recognise it."

"All of them?"

"All but four."

Something itched the inside of his carapace. "And all different?"

"There were common themes, stolen parts, broken parts from their cells, not all had been fashioned into weapons, I'm not sure they all could, some just seemed to be stockpiling, but... yes."

"All but four." The itching continued.

"Yes, Com..."

"The gods! Go back and re-search those four again. Use instruments."

"How many?"

"Two of the four. They'd found a way to get behind the panels. One had made multiple weapons, more than he could use alone."

"And the other two had nothing?"

"No, Commander, we're certain."

He pondered, something digging at his mind. "No. Move them both to another cell. Actually move all four of them. The other two might have more than one hiding spot."

"Commander, I assure you, we searched..."

"Just do it."

The lights flickered, and he sighed.

"All of them, Fleet Admiral. But we've recovered more than half."

"Commander, is your ship compromised?"

"No sir, they are limited in what they can do."

"Kill them immediately upon capture. This is ridiculous."

"Yes, Fleet Admiral."

In the scoutship: "To the escape pods! Evacuate the ship." Klaxons sounded.

In the flagship. "Order the grand fleet to fire on the ship as soon as the pods are clear. *Before* starting rescue."

"And you lost a second ship?" the angular being asked her, as he watched the reports.

"Three, all up," she said brightly.

"Surely after the second..."

"They evacuated the second ship in individual space-suits, not pods, into open space. Each was verified before being brought on board the third ship."

"So how...?"

"Apparently they cut the heads off several low ranked crew members, jammed themselves somehow into the rest of the suit, and... operated the head like a puppet."

"Meaning?"

"The stuffed their hands inside the neck to operate the mouth, while they themselves talked in near-fluent Single-Speech."

"The third ship?"

"No evacuation was attempted. When it moved towards the flagship, it was fired upon and destroyed. Every escape pod was hunted down and destroyed. Every body that floated free of the wreckage was destroyed. By this stage, the original Fleet Admiral had gone quite mad, he ordered the entire Fleet of Conquest to ram into the human planet at relativistic velocity. His second in command executed him, retreated the fleet to a nearby star-system and contacted their superiors for instruction."

"You went back."

"Of course."

"Even though they hadn't then left their planet, had no ability to leave their planet, and had no idea you existed."

"Correct. Well, they had rumours. Our ships weren't as perfectly cloaked as we thought. But, correct."

"Why contact them at all? Leave them in their own system."

"They were advancing rapidly. They were going to get out eventually."

"Maybe your Admiral wasn't so mad. Just kill them all..."

She laughed. "How could we ever be sure?"

"So you pretended to be peace-loving."

"Harmless. And asked for an immediate peace and trade treaty."

"And they agreed?"

"Oh yes. They were quite enthusiastic. Many of them are obsessive xenophiles."

"Then they can't all be that bad?"

"They say that one of their ancient generals cut the right hand off every male of a captured tribe. Just as a warning to others."

"But they are a space-faring civilisation now. Surely..."

"They still have issues on their home world with suicide bombers and mass shootings. Murder-suicides are a common risk in familial disruptions. Their leaders require protection from there own people, even when popular." She thought for a moment.
"Especially when popular."

"And all the races that have joined your alliance, this is why none of you fight?"

"Oh, we still fight with each other, if we are sure the humans aren't watching the area."

"Even fighting each other, you're still worried about them merely finding out?"

"Oh gods yes. What if they want to help?"

"If we do this, how would our young find honour without battle?"

"Actually, the humans thought of that. They have 'sports'. Here, Javelin." With a click she brought up an example on the screen.

"Those are spears."

"Archery. <click>"

"Hunting bows?"

"Hunting? Ha! No. Here they compete for greatest strength. <click>"

"Only separately?"

"Here they battle over a ball. And here, and here, and here... <clickclickclick...>"

"Why do they not attack more violently if they are as aggressive as you claim?"

"These games have rules that ritualise their attacks."

"So they don't fight, but instead..."

"Oh, these are the direct fighting contests, fencing <click>, judo <click>, kendo <click>, tai kwando <click>," the list went on for some time, "boxing <click>..."

"Enough enough, you've made your..."

"...and 'mixed martial arts' <click>." She let that one play for a while.

"Gods. Are these men great rivals?"

"No, I think they own a chain of sporting goods stores together. They have more blatant battle simulations: Here's paintballing <click>, battle reenactments <click>, dodgeball <click>. Oh, and racing: Horses, cars, bikes, *motorbikes*. Aircraft. Spacecraft. Demolition derbies. <click click click click> And they quickly adopted Trials of Combat of our own warriors. <click> Although, of course, we don't call it that any more. And we had to invent some rules to limit it before we could let the humans near it."

"...Everyone seems to be having fun, at least."

She sighed. "Yeah."

They watched in silence for some time.

"You believe we should sue for peace."

"I don't know if that's enough. You shouldn't have even hinted at war. You might have ruined everything. Unless... Maybe you can say that 'declaring war' is how you begin a trade negotiation. They love haggling."

"We don't negotiate trade pricing. You charge what it is worth. You accept or decline. Anything else is accusing the other of lying..."

"I think from now on, your people are going to be legendary for your haggling culture."

"No..."

"Sorry."

He grimaced, in his race's style, and she showed him her understanding by letting him think in silence.

"Afterwards..." he started.

"Yes?"

"Can we at least fight your civilisation?"

"Oh, oh we'd like that."